



ROCKY MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Visions of Utopia

Course Syllabus:
Spring 2012

POL 318
Monday 6:00-8:30
Morledge-Kimball 125

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Course Description:

The earliest works of political science were profoundly concerned with the composition of the perfect system; models were delineated, compared and contrasted, and judged based on which was determined to be the “ideal type” of civil governance. While this type of theory was dominant in the ancient and pre-modern world, the coming of the scientific revolution brought with it a critical emphasis on the reality of power relations – and thus much scholarship in the field eschews utopian thinking in favor of studying empirical reality.

However, there remain strains of political theory which still focuses on the ideal. The notion behind such work is that we dream the impossible in order to achieve the possible, that if we don’t reach for the stars we’ll never move forward toward the most just and most equitable system. Unfortunately, in practice, the quest for perfection has more often than not led to authoritarian governments which have fallen far short of their professed ideals.

Thus those who study politics and political theory are constantly required to face a perpetual force antithesis to temporal realities. Nowhere is this dichotomous relationship more directly addressed than in works of political fiction, which in a highly-accessible manner address the fundamental tensions between and among concepts of order, justice, liberty, freedom, cooperation, and peace.

To facilitate our depth of understanding on this topic, course readings will therefore evolve along the following trajectory:

1. Theoretical conceptions of the ideal system;
2. Scholarly critiques and defenses of utopian thinking;
3. Fictional representations of both utopia and dystopia.

Required Readings:

Frederic Bastiat, *The Law* (1614270570)
Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1599867524)
The Bhagavad Gita (0140449183)

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (0451531167)
James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (0060594527)
Thomas More, *Utopia* (0486295834)
B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (9780872207783)
Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (0380633132)

Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis."
Andrew Hacker, "In Defense of Utopia."
Daniel Sabia, "Utopia as Critique."
Lyman Tower Sargent, "Authority & Utopia: Utopianism in Political Thought."

Supplemental readings will be handed out in class or can be obtained online.

Course Policies:

The first requirement of each student is to understand that this is an academic environment and as such it is necessary that there is a high degree of civility, respect for fellow students, and respect for the material. You are expected to do *all* assigned readings, and you must participate in class if you hope to earn a passing grade.

1. Missed Classes: This course covers a great deal of material and meets just once a week; therefore repeated absences will not be tolerated. Students are allowed one absence, regardless of circumstance. Subsequent absences will result in your course grade being rescaled down by 1/3; i.e. a student with four absences will have their final grade reduced 1 point on a 4.0 scale.
2. Missed Assignments: If you do not turn in a graded assignment your maximum grade in the course will be rescaled along a 90/80/70/60 scale; i.e. if you fail to hand in a paper worth 20 percent of your grade, your highest possible grade in the class will be a B, regardless of your average on a 4-point scale.
3. Late Papers: Papers will lose one full letter grade per class session late. No exceptions.
4. Plagiarism and Cheating: Neither will be tolerated, and if a student is caught doing either they will fail the course and I will recommend to the Dean of Students that said student be expelled from school.
5. Laptops: Laptops or the use of other electronic devices is not allowed in class. This includes e-readers, as I will not participate in the demise of the written word.
6. Email: Do not assume that I check my email every day and do not use email as a means of conversation. Email should be used only for quick, non-emergency questions and for setting up appointments for face-to-face meetings in my office.

Role Expectations:

Professor: my role is simply to facilitate student learning; I am not here to spoon-feed or “teach” the materials per se, but rather what I will do is run the course as a true seminar which emphasizes discussion and fosters a more holistic comprehension of our readings. Expect that within minutes of the start of each session I will present a series of questions designed to open up a conversation about the readings. The course will not follow a lecture format, although certainly I am here to explain more difficult concepts, ideas, etc.

Students: students must first and foremost take ownership over their own education, which means that you are expected to do all required readings, write up notes for discussion, and show up to class prepared to ask and answer questions related to the premises and arguments presented in that session’s materials. As stated above, this is not a lecture so you must arrive ready to discuss what you have found interesting, difficult, debatable, etc. in the assigned readings.

Graded Assignments

Dialog Papers:

Upon completion of the non-fiction component of the course, on week 6 of the semester, students are required to compose a dialog in which Frederic Bastiat, Karl Marx, and Krishna debate the proper ordering of society from their own unique historical and theoretical perspective. Papers are to be 5-7 pages in length, and in general will serve as a means of exploration of the overarching concept of searching for the ideal system. A detailed prompt will be handed out in class to guide your essays.

Book Reviews:

Each student will be responsible for writing four 3-5 page analytical book reviews on the utopian novels read in class (this excludes *Utopia*). Essays are due on the *Friday* after we finish our discussion on each. Multiple handouts will be given to guide these papers, and no additional/outside research will be required.

Final Capstone Paper:

After having read theoretical, critical, and fictional works of utopian literature, students will compose a 12-15 page paper which delineates and discusses the problems and prospects of utopian political thought presented throughout the course. Papers will analyze and assess the themes of human nature, the social contract, freedom, liberty, equality/inequality, social and political justice, and human happiness. As with the dialog and review papers, a detailed handout will be provided, which will guide students toward a comprehensive analysis of this particular type of theory and narrative.

Grading:

Papers will be graded on an A-F scale and will be averaged as follows:

Dialog Paper:	15 percent
Book Reviews:	10 percent each
Final Paper:	25 percent
Participation:	20 percent

Grading Criteria:

These are the standards I adhere to when I grade essays. Pluses and minuses represent shades of difference, as do split grades (e.g. B-/C+). Grades are based on the evidence of the essay submitted, not on effort or time spent.

A

Excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that grapples with interesting, complex ideas; responds discerningly to counter-arguments; and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. The analysis enhances, rather than underscores, the reader's and writer's knowledge (it doesn't simply repeat what has been taught). There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay. Its introduction opens up, rather than flatly announces, its thesis. Its conclusion is something more than a summary. The language is clean, precise, often elegant. The reader should feel enlightened and educated for having read the paper. There's something new in your analysis, something perhaps only you could have written and explored, in this particular way. The writer's stake in the material is obvious.

B

A piece of writing that reaches high and achieves many of its aims. The ideas are solid and progressively explored but some thin patches require more analysis and/or some stray thoughts don't fit in. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not. The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that I have to make some of the connections that the writer should have made clear for me. This is a solid essay whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be rather routine (the limitation is largely conceptual).

C

A piece of writing that has real problems in one of these areas: conception (there's at least one main idea but it is fuzzy and difficult to understand); structure (non-linear development of your ideas); use of textual evidence (weak or non-existent -- the connections among the ideas and the evidence are not made and/or are presented without context, or are simple platitudes and generalizations); language (the sentences are often awkward, dependent on unexplained abstractions, sometimes contradict each other). The essay may not move forward but rather may repeat its main points, or it may touch upon many (and apparently unrelated) ideas without exploring any of them in sufficient depth and without a developmental flow. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and transitions may be a problem.
-or- an essay that is largely plot summary or "interpretive summary" of the text, but is written without major problems.
-or- an essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something. Well-written, but scant intellectual content -- mostly opinion.

D and F

These are efforts that are wildly shorter than they ought to be to grapple seriously with ideas.
-or- those that are extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above: aims, structure, use of evidence, language, etc.;
-or- those that do not come close to addressing the expectations of the essay assignment.

Participation:

The majority of class time will be devoted to discussion of the assigned readings. Discussion can include (but is not limited to) an analysis and/or critique of the author's position, a comparison of the assigned work to another text, or debate as to the meaning or merit of a given work (or particular points therein).

Class participation is evaluated on quality rather than quantity. Comments need not mirror the position of the author (or the professor). You are graded not on the "correctness" of your position, but rather on your analysis of the material and your ability to articulate your ideas. You don't have to be at the center of every debate, but students who make little or no effort to enter discussions will receive a lower participation grade. Discussion will become lively, heated even. Always respect the positions of others. When you disagree with someone, be sure to criticize the *idea* and not the person.

Participation will be graded according to the following criteria:

A

The student in this grade range arrives in class each day thoroughly prepared with comments and questions on the assigned reading. Comments reveal that the student has read carefully; this student occasionally initiates the discussion without waiting for the professor to do so. This student does not, however, try to dominate the class, but listens carefully to the remarks made by fellow class members, and responds as readily to these as to the instructor's questions.

B

The student in this grade range participates in most discussions, although not as fully or reliably as the student described above. There is evidence of having done the reading. This student pays attention to the comments of the other students.

C

The student in this grade range participates only intermittently, and is more willing to discuss broad, general questions than to engage in concrete analysis of an assigned text. Sometimes unprepared, this student lacks interest in the ideas of other members of the class, neglects to bring the proper text to class, and is often inattentive.

D or F

The student in this grade range seldom if ever participates.

Things that lower your participation grade:

- * Not paying attention in class
- * A ringing cellphone
- * Talking to your neighbor or holding conversations separate from the class discussion
- * A student who is seen using their phone for text messaging will receive an F as their final participation grade

NOTE: Unlike paper grades, participation will *not* be given plus/minus or split grades, and your final grade is weighted in a manner such as to make it impossible for you to receive an A for the course if your participation grade is not an A.

Semester Schedule:

Week 1:

1/9

Introduction and Course Outline

“Critical Reading” handout

Andrew Hacker, “In Defense of Utopia.”

Ralf Dahrendorf, “Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis.”

Week 2:

1/16

Martin Luther the King Day

Week 3:

1/23

Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

Hacker/Dahrendorf analysis papers due

Week 4:

1/30

Bastiat, *The Law*

Week 5:

2/6

The Bhagavad Gita

Week 6:

2/13

Dialog Papers Due

Week 7:

2/20

More, *Utopia*

Week 8:

2/27

Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Chapters I-XVIII

Week 9:

3/5

Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Chapters XIX-XXVIII

Week 10:

3/12

Zamyatin, *We*, Entries 1-22

Week 11:

3/19

Zamyatin, *We*, Entries 23-40

Week 12:

3/26

Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, Prologue-Chapter 6

Week 13:

4/2

Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, Chapter 7-Epilogue

Week 14:

4/9

Easter Break

Week 15:

4/16

Skinner, *Walden Two* Chapters 1-20

Week 16:

4/23

Skinner, *Walden Two* Chapters 21-36

4/30

CAPSTONE PAPERS DUE